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Being a Disciple of 'The Way': Vocation and Mission in the *Didache*

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When we start thinking about our lives, where we are now with decisions to make, the past and how through various ups and downs we have arrived here, and then the future, our hopes and desires, we often adopt the image of walking along a path as if it is the most natural image in the world. Looking backwards we might say that 'our *path* has been rocky'; in the present we might say that 'we are coming to a fork in the *road* and must make some hard decisions'; and when we are planning we say 'that the *way* ahead looks clear.' We talk about 'maps for life' and we have 'road maps for development.' The notion of life as walking along a path, indeed walking towards a destination, seems deeply embedded within us. This imagery is also part of the symbolism of many religions. Sometimes we give it an explicitly religious expression as when we compare life to a 'pilgrimage,' or, as we find in Vatican II, we refer to the Church as a 'pilgrim people' (*Lumen Gentium*, nn. 47-51); but often when we simply refer to 'our *way* of life' we have the religious dimension hovering in the background. Using the images of 'way,' 'path,' or 'road' for our lives we are implicitly invoking the notion that life is about movement, there is dynamism, and there is freedom with scope for choices.

By contrast, other notions can seem static or imply a lack of freedom. The common modern notion of 'life-style' is static; it implies that others are determining or appreciating 'our style.' While other images assume that we are passive: simply responding to forces beyond our control. Even the common religious theme of 'vocation' can imply that our task is set from outside us and we just accept it as something imposed. But the image of walking along a 'road' implies that we are moving, looking forward, and can choose where our foot falls next. Not surprisingly, this notion had been in use in Judaism for centuries (e.g. Jer 6:16) before the time of Jesus and has played a key role in Christianity from the start: 'These men are servants of the Most High God,

who proclaim to you *the way* of salvation' (Acts 16:17). Indeed, 'The Way' became an early name used by the disciples of Jesus to designate themselves as a group: 'But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to *The Way*, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem' (Acts 9:1-2).

In this paper I want to explore how this image of 'a way,' and of 'a choice of ways' became a central part of early Christian missionary endeavour through its place in the first-century handbook for disciples known as the *Didache*. The *Didache* is now a relatively obscure document – usually only read by theologians – but it is our best insight in the lives and practices of those early Christians who were the audiences for the gospels when they were first preached.

The Two Ways

> But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. (Dt 30:14-18)

This statement, put by the biblical author into the mouth of the great law-giver Moses, comes at the dramatic climax of the Book of Deuteronomy: all the law has been imparted, the new historical view of the past from the perspective of the Second Temple has been set out, and now, just before Moses' last will and the account of his death, the People of Israel are presented with this choice. The *way of covenant,* which leads to life and rejoicing in good things, and the *way of death,* which is the result of choosing another way and ignoring the commandments. Religion as offering humanity a moral choice has never been so dramatically described. And teachers, first Jewish and later both Jewish and Christian, would spend a lot of time fleshing out that final Mosaic challenge.

However, before we look at how that challenge was used in early Christian *didache* (= training), it is worth noting four aspects of that text in Deuteronomy that animated its many follow-ups until well into Christian times when some elements disappeared. First, this presents human goodness and evil as a moral choice. Good comes from good choices and evil from bad choices. This sounds simple, but many ancient cultures saw these outcomes as the result of either the whims of divine beings or of cosmic forces. There is no

place here for cosmic fatalism such as the notion that our destiny is written in the stars. In this vision our destiny is in our own hands: we must positively choose good and deliberately avoid evil. This is a commonplace today, but for many people in the Greco-Roman world it was a liberation from fatalism; and the notion of a religion that gave full scope to moral action (think of alternatives like a religion that is a series of attempts to placate an angry deity) was one of the attractive features of Judaism around the time of Jesus, and an important reason why it was attracting converts who were known as 'proselytes' or 'fearers of God' or 'worshippers of God.'

Second, this is not a challenge that is offered to an individual or a group of individuals: it is offered to a community, a single reality, 'the people.' The individual had to accept the way as a member of the people, but it was the whole community that had to choose to set out on the way to life. Moreover, when individuals abandoned the commandments, then the whole community was in jeopardy. We think of morality almost exclusively in individual terms – even when a whole society is led astray by a few individuals – and so find this notion of a 'people of the covenant' hard to appreciate. However, without this awareness of the centrality of community we cannot make sense of much of Jewish and early Christian writings on the Two Ways.

Third, the rules were not there just as an ethical standard: they were there as part of a formal relationship with God – a covenant with promises on both sides. Obedience was presented not as simply adherence to rules but as keeping one side of a bargain within a whole relationship with God. We tend to break religion into 'relationship' and 'rules' – but we cannot understand the *Didache* if we start with such a distinction. The *Didache* can start with a set of rules because these presuppose a relationship: the rules show the parameters of the relationship one is choosing.

And, fourthly, there is the assumption that these rules are within our capability, the people can accomplish such a life, they are there for their good, and they are not there as a kind of test or 'obstacle course' to see who will fall out. God does not set the rules as a way of weeding out the weaklings; it is not an examination, but a guide to how to progress from life to life. And it is assumed that God wants the whole people, and therefore every member of the community, to have life.

Turning the choice presented in the covenant into a list of 'what had to be done' and 'what had to be avoided' became a task for teachers: lists would make the challenge simpler to communicate, easier to remember, and produce a sense of community in the group – everyone could recite the same lists and sense that they were part of a shared project. We have such a list from among the writings found in Qumran – it was used by the community that hid the 'Dead Sea Scrolls' – and we have several early Christian examples apart from that in the *Didache*. Each list is different, yet all are similar. While the lists copy from one another, there probably was no single 'original' of which they are variants. Rather there was the idea of such a list of 'do-s and don't-s' and a common stock of moral wisdom, and then different teachers used to a greater

or lesser extent an existing list. We have several such lists in early Christian texts and their importance is not that we might find '*the* list,' but that they show us the prominent place that was attached to this sort of moral training for those who were entering the community of the new covenant.

In the *Didache* this list of how a member of the church should live takes up just over a third of the whole document. But while the image of 'do-s and don't-s' is what strikes everyone on reading the *Didache* for the first time, it is actually a far more sophisticated vision of Christian living than a simple checklist of actions. The *Didache* opens with a choice: on the one hand there is the way of life, and on the other hand there is the way of death – you can hear the voice of someone reciting this to his or her apprentice – and there is a great difference between these ways (Did 1:1). And the difference between them is not only in content but in the way they are presented: the 'don't-s' are a list of actions to avoid, but the way of life is presented in a far more all-embracing way: here are the underlying attitudes that must inform particular actions.

The renewed covenant

The 'Way of Life' begins with a statement that we, familiar with the gospels, imagine in the context of a scene from the life of Jesus:

> And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets' (Mt 22:35-40).

And before Matthew presented it in this way, Mark had used it in his preaching with different scenery and with a slightly different slant:

> And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these' (Mk 12:28-31).

But in the *Didache* we get this central piece of early Christian teaching *without* scenery or comment:

> The way of life is this: first, you shall love God who created you; second, your neighbor as yourself; all those things which you do not want to be done to

you, you should not do to others (Did 1:2).

The so-called 'Golden Rule' is given here just tacked on the first and second Christian commandments. It is baldly stated as the basis of how the group lives. When integrated into the preaching, by Matthew (7:12) and Luke (6:31), it takes a positive form: so treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself. We are tempted to ask which form was 'original': do *not* do what you would *not* like others to do to you, or act as you would like others to act? But such a question misses the basic point: wisdom consists in appreciating that individuals act within society and the actions of each must be those that build community. Humans are not islands. This means acting as you would want others to act and not acting as you would want others not to act. The community wanted to rejoice in life: that involved acting in life-enhancing ways while rejecting ways that destroyed the peace and harmony of life within the group.

This way of living as God's new people is then spelled out in more detail where the Christian had to act in a way different from the ways that others have acted towards him or her. So 'the teaching' on loving God and neighbor means:

> Bless those who curse you;
> Pray for those who are your enemies;
> Do fasts for those who persecute you.
> What benefit is it if you love those who love you: even the Gentiles do that; rather, you must love those who hate you, and so you are not to treat the other person as your enemy.
> Abstain from carnal desires.
> If someone strikes your left cheek, then turn the right cheek towards him also and you will be perfect.
> If someone makes you go one mile, then go the extra mile with him.
> If someone takes your coat, then let him have your jacket.
> If someone takes your property, then you are not allowed to ask for it back.
> Give to everyone who asks help from you, and do not seek a return because the Father wants his generosity to be shared with everyone.
> Blessed is the one that gives according to this command, for that person there is no punishment. But, watch out for the one who received these things: if they receive things from need, then there is no punishment, but if they receive these things without need then they shall have to explain why they acted in that way and they shall be questioned about it when in prison and they will not be released until the last penny is repaid.
> But remember it has also been said that 'you should let your gift sweat in your hands until you know to whom to give it.' (Did 1:3-6)

Again, anyone familiar with the gospels has heard most of this already. In the gospels it is presented in various scenes and sermons of Jesus, although the scenes often differ between Luke and Matthew. Some of it can be found elsewhere in the early writings that came to be considered as the New

Testament. For example, 'abstain from carnal desires' is found in 1 Pet 2:11: 'Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against your soul.' The final item about letting your gift sweat in your hands cannot be found exactly in any known scriptural text (the nearest is Sir 12:1) but became a proverb among Christians for we find Augustine still quoting it in the early fifth century and assuming that his audience knew it.

Over the years most of the energy devoted to this passage has focused on whether this is (1) a variant of Matthew's gospel (hence some date the *Didache* after that gospel), or (2) from the same strand of memory within the church as that which Matthew incorporated into his preaching (a very common position), or (3) whether Matthew committed this to memory as *didache* and then wove the teaching known among his audience into his presentation of the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection (another common position today). However, this concern about relating the *Didache* to another early Christian text passes over the most striking feature of what this tells us about early Christianity. This teaching about loving and forgiving enemies is not some 'counsel of perfection' or some ideal: it is presented as the ordinary teaching that every Christian had to take as part and parcel of following the Way of Life. Moreover, this was all seen as simply spelling out the first Christian commandment: to love God. Looked at in this way it puts the preaching of the evangelists in perspective: they provide commentary and context; here in the teaching, it is laid out as the basic demands of discipleship. It also helps us to understand statements like: 'If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen' (1 Jn 4:20), or 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome' (1 Jn 5:3).

The *Didache* then moves on to 'the second commandment of the teaching' (Did 2:1) which it sees as relating to obeying laws about our conduct with our neighbor:

> You shall not murder.
> You shall not commit adultery.
> You shall not corrupt boys.
> You shall not be promiscuous.
> You shall not steal.
> You shall not practice divination.
> You shall not practice with magic potions.
> You shall not kill a child in the womb nor expose infants.
> You shall not try to take your neighbor's goods.
> You shall not perjure yourself.
> You shall not act as a false witness.
> You shall not speak evil of others.
> You shall not hold grudges.
> Do not be fickle or deceitful because the deceitful tongue is the snare of death.

(Did 2:2-4)

This is far more familiar teaching: we know most of it as the Ten Commandments and the additions can be seen as special instances of the commandments.

For the early community making the choice of the way was a choice for a life of moral responsibility where many of the actions they were to see as sinful – such as divination or seeking to get magical spells to ward off evil – would have been taken for granted in the wider culture. The person who was learning this (the apprentice) from the Christian who was doing the training is referred to here as 'my child' – a typical expression in master-disciple training manuals – and told to flee away from every evil and even from everything resembling it' (Did 3:1). The 'child' must learn not to be arrogant but humble, because the humble shall inherit the earth' (Did 3:7).

Then the teaching returns to the positive way that a Christian must live. The disciple must remember the one who is acting as trainer and give him/her respect because he/she speaks the word of the Lord, and 'whenever the Lord's nature is preached, there the Lord is present' (Did 4:1). The very act of learning to be a Christian, and learning the teaching, is a holy activity that brings student and teacher into the divine presence. Here we see how close is the *Didache* to its Jewish background: to study God's law with a teacher is to come into the divine presence. This is the 'high' view of learning/teaching that was common in Judaism – hence the title of respect, *rabbi*, given to Jesus – and remained so; but all too soon would be passed over in Christianity. This interest in teaching also extends to the role of parents with children: they must not neglect 'son or daughter but from their youth teach them the fear of God' (Did 4:9). The notion that 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction' is traditional wisdom (Prov 1:7 for example), but the idea that training in The Way extends to both son *and* daughter is something new.

Much of this is familiar because it is similar to later Christian teaching, other aspects are understandable against the background of the larger society – such as the horror of magical practices that had long been seen, within Judaism, as leading to idolatry (Did 3:4) – but some prescriptions still seem strange. While we have a prohibition of grumbling (Did 3:6 and 4:7), a call for people to work honestly with their hands (Did 4:6) and to share everything with a brother in need (Did 4:8); we also have a ban on giving orders to your slaves when angry (Did 4:10) and a call to slaves to be submissive in fear and respect (Did 4:11). Moreover, there is an expectation that individuals would acknowledge their sins in the presence of the community (Did 4:13); a practice that several centuries later would lead to major problems within Christianity.

Having gone into so much detail on the demands of the Way of Life, the Way of Death is given in summary. All the acts already forbidden ('murders, adulteries,... thefts, idolatries' – Did 5:1) are listed in summary as the steps along the other path. But in this repetition, from the opposite perspective,

there is not just the usual list of individual sinful acts, but another reminder of the obligations to the community. The Way of Death involves:

> Showing no mercy to the poor.
> Not working on behalf of the oppressed
> [People] not knowing the God who made them.
> Being murderers of children.
> Being corrupters of God's creation.
> Turning away from those in need.
> Being advocates of the wealthy;
> and lawless judges of the poor (Did 5:2).

The *Didache* seems to be fully aware of the phenomenon of those who saw morality in terms of the avoidance of specific sinful acts by the individual, while ignoring the social nature of sin and the social demands that are made on those who seek God. Christians were not to ignore the demands of seeking justice in society and have a constant concern for the poor, and still imagine that they were not on the Way of Death.

Jesus and the Teaching

In reading the Two Ways we are immediately confronted with the difference between the *kerugma* (preaching) and the *didache* (training). Here is an example. Most Christians are familiar with this statement: if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Indeed, it has been shortened in common parlance to the phrase: 'turning the other cheek,' implying that one should not retaliate with violence for violence. If we ask Christians where this statement comes from, and why it is important, the answer will be either that it comes from Jesus and, therefore, deserves some respect; or that it is in the Christians' holy book and as such has authority and deserves respect. So, even if we think turning the other cheek to be a daft idea or pious ideal, the explanation involves the notion of authority. You can find it in the Sermon on the Mount ('But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also': Mt 5:39) and so it is part of the Christian legacy. However, in the *Didache* none of these demands – and it contains virtually the same content of the Sermon on the Mount but in a different format – are explained by an appeal to authority. Rather, this is the way of the community of the Christians so that they as a community 'whom the Spirit has prepared' (Did 4:10) can follow the Way of Life. While we seek an explanation for what we find inexplicable and, in effect, disavow the idea by appealing to authority, they took this stance as a basic moral demand flowing from the type of community to which they had committed themselves.

In the disciple training (*didache*) the demands of The Way were laid out as a collection of rules. These turned the headline commandment of 'love God and

neighbor' into immediate and practical actions: such as avoiding sorcery in one instance of everyday life and turning the other cheek in another. Why does one do this? Because it is part of the package of wisdom of the community of the new covenant: God has set before us two ways, the Spirit has prepared us, and the Lord has come among us, and so these ways of behaving are the implications of the Way of Life. When by contrast the evangelist preached (the *kerugma*) the good news that Jesus is the savior of the people he was engaging in a completely different task (see Stanton, 9-62). Incorporating the same content into the gospel is not simply reiterating the teaching while giving it 'a named source' nor is it attempting to justify the teaching by giving it an authoritative origin (most of it can be found, in any case, within Jewish tradition), but doing something rather different. The teaching was taken for granted: this was the Way of the community, it has been committed to memory, it was the standard by which they sought to live. The evangelist now tells the larger story of the plan of God which reaches back into the history of Israel (e.g. Mt 1:1-16) and reaches forwards to embrace the whole mission of the people to make disciples of all nations and the end of time (e.g. Mt 28:20), and at the heart of this plan is the christ-event: the totality that is the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the gospel the community rejoice in and celebrate. Part of this preaching of the gospel is to show that Jesus lies at the centre of this great covenant – and one of the ways that this is shown is by demonstrating that his life and teaching is the perfect expression of the covenant's Way of Life. Far from the evangelists linking the teaching to Jesus to give it authority, they link Jesus to the teaching to show who he is as the Anointed of the Father.

Jews and Gentiles

Reading the Two Ways we are forcefully struck by how embedded the life of the early church was within Jewish life and practice at the time and within the vision of life that was the covenant of Israel. This covenant was not yet seen by followers of Jesus as an 'old covenant' (or 'old testament'), rather it was the same covenant, the same promise by God, and the same acceptance of being God's people that was continuing now in their following of Jesus. With Jesus that covenant had reached the new stage of the messiah (literally: 'the anointed one'; in Greek terminology: 'the christ') having come among the people. And while we shall note in later chapters that there were tensions between the followers of Jesus and other Jews, the dominant theme in this section of the *Didache* is that the Way of Life required in following the Messiah follows on from the Way of Life that the covenant with Israel demanded. We see this continuity by looking at Jewish texts from before Jesus' time, for example a short work known as the *Testament of Asher*, by looking at the *Community Rule* from Qumran which is roughly contemporary with Jesus and the *Didache*. Likewise we find this continuity formally

embraced by Matthew when he has Jesus utter these words: 'For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Mt 5:18).

However, this group of Christians knows that it is attracting people to The Way for whom the covenant, and its demands, are something new. We are familiar with this moment in the history of the early Church from Paul's letters where he struggles with those who want to force gentiles who are seeking to become followers of Jesus to take up *all* the demands of the Law such as adherence to the dietary laws, and even for men converts to undergo circumcision. This issue of how many of the detailed demands of the covenant are necessary for gentile converts is also present in the *Didache*. For the *Didache* these converts did not have to take on-board all the demands listed in the Law and become perfect observers of the Law, rather this is what it calls for:

> Take care that no one leads you astray from this Way of the Teaching, because any other teaching takes you away from God. Now if you are able to bear the whole of the Lord's yoke, you will be complete. However, if you are not able [to bear that yoke], then do what you can.
>
> And concerning food regulations, bear what you are able. However, you must keep strictly away from meat that has been sacrificed to idols for involvement with it involves worship of dead gods (Did 6:1-3).

The *Didache* is taking a moderate approach: the covenant, the relationship with God and the demands of a moral life, so that one shared in that covenant; these are what is important. On the other details there was freedom to do what one could. This moderation and practical sense has led one commentator to praise this as 'the pastoral genius of the *Didache*' and it is the key to its missionary genius as well.

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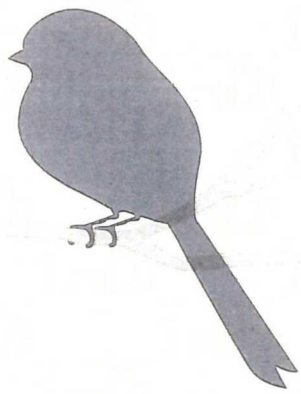

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